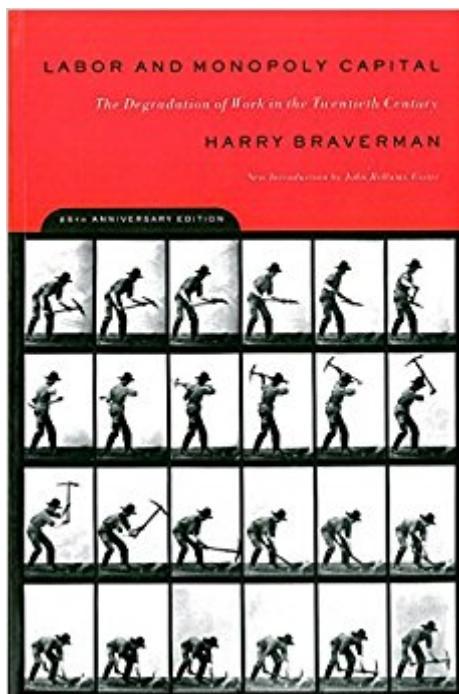


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Labor And Monopoly Capital: The Degradation Of Work In The Twentieth Century



Synopsis

This widely acclaimed book, first published in 1974, was a classic from its first day in print. Written in a direct, inviting way by Harry Braverman, whose years as an industrial worker gave him rich personal insight into work, Labor and Monopoly Capital overturned the reigning ideologies of academic sociology. This new edition features an introduction by John Bellamy Foster that sets the work in historical and theoretical context, as well as two rare articles by Braverman, "The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century" (1975) and "Two Comments" (1976), that add much to our understanding of the book.

Book Information

Paperback: 465 pages

Publisher: Monthly Review Press; 25th Anniversary ed. edition (December 1, 1998)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0853459401

ISBN-13: 978-0853459408

Product Dimensions: 5.9 x 0.8 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 13 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #284,708 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #119 in Books > Business & Money > Economics > Commerce #122 in Books > Textbooks > Business & Finance > Economics > Economic Theory #268 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Labor & Industrial Relations

Customer Reviews

Harry Braverman was director of Monthly Review Press at the time of his death in 1976. John Bellamy Foster is associate professor of sociology at the University of Oregon, author of *The Vulnerable Planet*, and co-editor of *In Defense of History: Marxism and Postmodern Agenda*.

I bought this several years ago, but I had left it on my shelf for too long, one of those books I know I should have read, but other books just kept getting in the way. I don't remember the impetus, but I was looking at all my unread and half read books that I had relegated to the shelves - their newness lost and becoming dusty fixtures - and I grabbed Braverman's study of the nature of work. What struck me most about this work was that it was researched and written in the late 60s and early seventies, right before the breakdown of

the Bretton Woods system and contemporary with the flashes of revolt amongst the various people who had been forgotten in the capitalistic system (students, women, African-americans). In a way, a naive look at the time is that it was the last time that Capitalism may have been said to work in the way its cheerleaders say it will work with shared growth like Kennedy's "A rising tide lifting all boats." Knowledge of the historical record will show that there was always that undercurrent of malaise in the working world as capitalism may have worked on the surface, but underneath that work was born on the back of unpaid women at home and underpaid workers in the factories and mines and white collar workers. Braverman examines how labor was atomized and demarcated and prescribed even for those who were highly educated. What is also striking is how current and relevant the examination is, even with 40 years passing between the initial publication and today. The machines feared have become the robots in our discourse, but the theme underneath it all is the fear of the lack of autonomy and self-direction that takes craftsmen to laborers, no matter if the skill is working with your hands or your mind. Braverman did work within the tradition of the folks at the Monthly Review, and this speaks to Sweezy and Baran's "Monopoly Capital," which I have not read. Despite my own failings, I think this was a worthwhile read.

It is not enough that capitalism alienates workers from the wealth created by their work, it also makes their work less meaningful. Harry Braverman's landmark 1974 study, "Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Labor" is an update of Marx's "Capital." Many of the critics of Marx said that his findings about the frustrations of wage labor applied to factory workers. Modern technology would eventually eliminate the tedium and alienation associated with assembly-line work. Braverman shows that, with all the changes in the work-force and technology, that did not happen. It has gotten worse. Wage workers still don't like their jobs. Did you ever wonder why the press and media pay so little attention to work and workers while constantly elevating leisure, consumption, travel, and wealth? We are taught always to look forward to "labor-saving" devices and new technologies. Science will solve all the unpleasantness of work and poverty. The media ignores workers and jobs because it is intent on proving the teaching in Genesis that work is indeed a punishment for original sin. Capitalists don't want to put workers in charge of their jobs and don't want them to seem capable of doing that. It was Adam Smith in "The Wealth of Nations" who first warned of the "de-skilling" of work in the factory system. As an example, he used the making of pins, which once was done by a single craftsman. In factories, it was done by 16 different people doing 16 different, simple procedures. (Now machines do the whole thing.) The Popes' encyclicals on social justice

often repeated Smith's warning about the de-humanization of work and turning humans into machines. It is to the advantage of capitalists and profits to standardize work procedures by breaking them down to the simplest, repetitive, actions done by one person, most aptly typified in assembly-line work. This is the reason that today, so many people are over-qualified and over-educated for their jobs. One commentator said, "We have created too many dumb jobs for which we don't have enough dumb people." Braverman shows how the dumbing-down and de-skilling process is just as prevalent among office and white-collar workers as it was among blue-collar workers in Marx's day. Unfortunately, the introductions of automation and new technologies has not solved that problem. For instance, Braverman shows that the number of janitor-porter jobs has risen in direct proportion to the rise in engineering jobs. New technologies do not eliminate the tedium and lack of creative challenge that most people face in wage jobs. My son, a craftsman, tells me that this has happened in the building industry. Skills like cabinet building--formerly performed by one person--have been fragmented into simple repetitive procedures performed by a number of workers. In the 1970s, managers were alarmed by the publicity given to the dissatisfactions of workers with their work. High levels of walkouts, strikes, turnovers, and absenteeism caused them to introduce new measures of "job enlargement." They attempted to rotate people among jobs and give them responsibilities for minor adjustments in the workplace. None of that has worked, however, because they did not address the basic cause of the problem. It is this antagonistic class system of capitalism (i.e. managers vs. the managed) that determines the meaningfulness of work, not the technologies or the band-aids of job enlargement. People in the future will look back and wonder why we put up with capitalism for so long--as we previously did with slavery. We not only spend most of our lives at work, that's what we are here for. It should be the most interesting part of our lives. Work ennobles us and makes us human. That is where everyone should be able to exercise their creativity and energies for the benefit of others.

This book is a must read for any serious student of labor processes and continuous improvement methods. This would include Lean Six Sigma and any other change management or continuous improvement methodologies. Although the book was originally written in the early 1970's, it is difficult to dismiss Braverman's main arguments. Braverman, was concerned with the degradation of work as it affected the worker and uncovering the primary relationships of workers to the means of production under capitalism. One of many relationships that Braverman addresses is the Babbage Principle. Babbage principle states that higher worker skill levels result in higher wages

being paid. Therefore, in a capitalist system, it is beneficial and financially rewarding to the owner(s) to work toward diminishing the skills required in work processes. Automation, where sophisticated machines take over more and more work processes, is a prime example. Braverman argues that this economic principle results in a systemic tendency towards the degradation of human labor in capitalistic societies. As for Lean Six Sigma systems resolving the issue through increased participation Braverman states that system such as these only represent a style of management. Although there is a pretense by management of the benefit to the worker, these methods actually do little to change the position of the worker as the fundamental economics of labor remain the same. This book is a must read for any serious student of change management and continuous improvement methods.

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